Sexuality and subjectivity, gender and production: the dichotomies of a contemporary garment

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Album artwork for Vulnicura by Bjork, latex bodysuit by Syren Latex, photographed by Inez + Vinoodh (2015)
CYBORG SUBJECTIVITY

In the artwork for her most recent LP titled Vulnicura, (2015) Bjork, an Icelandic artist, is wearing a black glossy catsuit produced by a LA based fetish wear company, Syren Latex. Her head and shoulders adorned in a dandelion-like throw of a delicate structure, and the garment on her torso displaying a shape that bears resemblance to a wound and a vaginal cavity, Bjork’s silhouette performs an impression on the verge of a human and a cyborg. Communicating binary visual information, the sleek surface of the fabric embodies a robotic being, concurrently offering very humane, tactile qualities, which facilitates a speculative dialogue upon the tensions of a human-machine in relation to socially established models of gender and sexuality, as they are subverted via the appearance of a performative, adorned body.

In various discourses upon the female, she frequently appears as not merely a human, but a humanoid; her body is to an extent robotised, as her gender status is being utilised as a pretext to theorise the female as a cyborg, by the means of an embodiment by interfusion with a commodity. Walter Benjamin has stated the fluid “dialectical exchange between the woman and ware”,1 implying the relevance of social production and exchange value in the constitution of a female that trades her body. Donna Haraway, however, has instead placed the cyborg female in the post-gender world,2 thus rejecting the association with prostitution and dissolving the allegedly seamless connection between sexual practice and sexual identity. Alternatively

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proposed are futuristic terms of gender theorisation that drive humans away from a patriarchal ideology, instead - towards science and technology as the means to sustain a genderless society. The figure of the female oscillates between the feminine cyborg and the sex worker, allowing a binary approach of domination and subjugation. A counterpoint to these readings of the body and identity lies in agender identity, an attempt to “transcend the actual biological body”, as stated by Joanne Entwistle. All these are encapsulated by a physical garment whose function is to supersede the social concepts of gender and femininity as mere gender appearance, differentiating between the totalising notion of female identity against subjectivity.

This essay will analyse the latex catsuit as a garment that abstains from socially established boundaries of gender and sexuality, and the fabric as generative of problematic relations between nature and artificiality when in a close encounter with a human body that is either externally produced (defined) or self-constituted as subjectivity beyond the categories of sex and gender. The garment will reveal its particular palpable qualities that allow it to remain in a symbiotic relationship with the wearer so as to produce material dialectical tensions. The significantly intricate relationship between the body and the garment, as a result of a constriction of the body within latex, will be seen as a representation of fetish that encompasses both marxist commodity fetishism and Benjamin’s claim of the object’s inorganic character that sexual attraction arises from.

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CYBORG, SEX, FEMININITY

As a garment associated with sexual promiscuity, the black catsuit can operate as a symbol that accounts for clothing as a “system linked to the expression of sexuality”⁴ in a fairly direct way. Joanne Entwistle presents this notion, arguing that it is merely culturally determined gender appearance which forms a visual code for traits recognised socially for ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’.⁵ Gender disguise occurs distinctly as Peggy Kamuf analyses the demimonde - a Benjaminian prostitute - as a set of allegories, loosened relations between “things and signs, faces and masks, meanings and values”.⁶ Gender appearance becomes detached from the individual as it is established as a template of a feminine body, and thus facilitates its commodification of a subject that, as reduced to its visuality and function, turns into a replicable model, a “product of men’s desire”.⁷ The prostitute, a commodified woman, enters a realm of numbers that transforms her into “commodities that are precise duplications of each other”,⁸ as she appropriates costume in order to signify the transition from sexuality as subjectivity to embracing the sexual aptitude as trade.

The female figure is totalised within a single profession that is largely characterised by the precise function of sexual labour. The cyborg by commodification becomes anonymous and each

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⁴ Ibid., p. 182
⁵ Ibid., p. 143
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next one is consumed as a copy of the prototype, fusing the female with a machine in what Benjamin calls “prostitution of numbers”. Such classification is undoubtedly of inhumane character, constituting robotized citizenship for the cyborg female, serially produced and consumed by the male seeking the anonymous and the inorganic. The serial replication of a sex worker in the confines of her profession, according to Benjamin, causes a forfeiture of the ‘aura’, understood as the unique character of a product, here - a trait lost in the process of accumulation. The woman is no longer a subject but an “eroticized object”. What is inherently entailed in such shift from the personal to mechanically reproducible is the exploitative relation between sex and gender that also frames the core problem of Marxist feminism. The female is externally defined and appropriated by men, as her body partakes in the value exchange, selling an “illusory appearance”. An informal exchange takes place when the body is constricted by a latex catsuit - what emerges is a complicated relation between the self-wearing latex - and the other - the onlooker. The two hypothetical encounters, however, engage with each other on an antagonistic basis regarding the central sensation of pleasure. While a latex catsuit provides sexual fulfilment via the “sight of one’s body as complete, hermetically sealed object”, the pleasure of trading one’s body remains bogus and it is its impression that according to Benjamin stands for “the ruse of prostitution”. Bjork’s costume makes an active attempt to subvert the ill-established assumption that there is a component “about being ‘female’ that

naturally binds women”15 and which allows serial classification, assuming that it is the body that defines gender. While a sexual organ is made visible in a strong graphic emphasis, the body conveys an impression of unidentifiable gender identity, in order to communicate the cultural origins of the concept of femininity embedded in sexuality. Donna Haraway proposes “troubling dualisms”16 that the female is placed between: reality and appearance (of subjective gender and commodified sexuality), activity and passivity (of the self-constituted woman and that who is constituted by men’s appropriation), and simply male and female. Entwistle adds to these dialectical qualities a problematising agent that extends the male and female social roles to masculinity and femininity, as fabricated gender appearances that deny forms of self-constitution. Finally, the most conspicuous tensions are drawn by the garment. The overtly sexual overprint is so evident that it is read as a symbol of a finished product of an anonymous body. Additionally, it employs visual representation of what is understood as the focal point of womanhood. A disguise implies blending of a boundary between reproduction and replication when a woman transforms into a cyborg, unless the body, as it occurs here, marks itself with a certain sense of absence while explicitly manifesting the outer form. In such case, the gender appearance remains entirely public, leaving no function for the physical body and the personal subjectivity that disperses through the latex shell.

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TOWARDS POSTMODERNITY

The black cyborg-like latex catsuit with a sexually charged overprint carries the significance of a transition between an oppressed body and an ability to control and dominate that might imply a transhumanist, robotic impression. Due to the sleek surface and a considerably bionic look the silhouette assumes when dressed in latex, the fabric allows to see beyond the boundaries of what is considered in essence humane in terms of gender differentiation. Effeminacy and vulnerability, which are associated with the concept of femininity, are displaced by a new extended interaction between a garment and an individual. The conditioning developed here is embodied by a BDSM mistress. Described as a “late twentieth-century machine”, her persona is a realization of the ending period of modernity, as it is considered a “fundamentally postmodern social invention”. Her clothing is an immediate way of communicating the relation of power that is a crucial component of the wearer’s self-identification within the profession, along with a sense of satisfaction that comes with one’s body being adorned in the garment. Consequently, as mentioned above, the pattern of pleasure represented is contradictory to that of a prostitute and, rather than using a disguise in order to project an impression of pleasure, the garment employed is worn precisely in order to generate the pivotal pleasurable sensation. The obscure relation perceptible between the garment and the dominatrix is far from that generated around the figure of a prostitute, since the profession does not entail direct sexual engagement with another human subject and thus the catsuit, closely embracing the body, does not unveil sexuality, nor does it produce a sense of provoked claim of

17 Ibid., p. 152
sexual objectification. Rather, it removes the discrepancy between a subjective individual and a sexual object by declaring no biological gender specification encased in it. Instead of emphasising the body, the catsuit questions the essentiality of the particular gender appearance of an individual. A sense of empowerment while wearing latex, as mentioned by Simon Hoare of London’s Atsuko Kudo latex fashion brand, does not lie in enhanced visual feminisation that reinforces established gender appearance. Instead, it is placed in connotative imagery of the dominatrix, a personification of power. This “intimacy and [...] power that was not generated in the history of sexuality” involves a path of reasoning that negotiates between what Walter Benjamin calls the organic and inorganic, yet problematises the issue of the distinction between those, as the organic is no longer associated with a sexual body capable of reproduction. The catsuit thus represents a gender-neutral individual, which stems from the lack of gender relevance, the problem being visualised by utilising technological imagery, inserting a “biotic component” into the discourse of human subjectivity. The connection between a human and a machine that is drawn from such synthesis is clearly conflated with an understanding of a female as a sexual object based on an ability to procreate. The garment operates in this case as an illustration of the vague state of human “formal knowledge of machine and organism, of technical and organic”, challenging cultural assumptions by means of performativity of the adorned body, a radical emphasis on the silhouette and the signs it conveys. A reconsideration of the notion of the natural is being suggested - the cyborg is not necessarily a futuristic term, as its conception takes place via detachment of sexual ability from the body.

21 Ibid., p. 161
22 Ibid., p. 178
FETISHISM AND NORMATIVITY

The tensions between natural and unnatural, organic and inorganic, human and product resonate profoundly in fetish. The significance of each escalates as the types of fetishism turn to superimpose and reveal a diversified understanding. The latex catsuit succeeds to accommodate this complex structure. Ideologically rooted in the culture of fetishism, it responds to the aspect of sexual attraction activated by the garment, as well as to the notion of commodity fetishism and Benjaminian concept of the inorganic. The conceptualising of fetish is to be found in the act of distancing sex from the organic, as stated by Benjamin. Danielle Lindemann describes this disintegration as “sexual gratification from a particular object, body part, activity, smell or other sensation that is not normatively considered erotic”. Interestingly, this proposed definition assumes the criterium of normativity being at work while sexual attraction arises, suggesting necessity of a socially established model of interest in human body, that is the organic appeal of the culturally agreed on, though problematic, gender appearance.

The notion of fetish is then interpreted as a contradiction to what is considered normative in terms of not only an erotic interest, but also the human body. Marxist commodity fetish, however, is understood as an outcome of a peculiar social relation between products of men’s labour and their producers. Alike in the previous case, the fetishisation of commodity and labour happens via detachment - here, the product is the detached from the man by the means of being attached monetary value. The act of manufacture does not result in the state of possession

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and, in reference to the Benjaminian concept, the inorganic (detached object) is separated from the organic (human labour). Similar tension applies to an objectified body. In the case of the prostitute, the human merges with the machine when “it is not clear who makes and who is made”. There is then an internal exchange between the natural and the unnatural within a commodity, as well as within a human body by an extension of this reasoning. While a product assumes a kind of human quality in the process of labour, the body of a sex worker is as the result of the same process abstracted from this trait. A body that does not connect to the organic on its own, transforms into an artificial, robotic organism.

THE SECOND SKIN

The fundamental issue of analysing the body encased in a latex catsuit, is the garment’s close proximity to the body and the relation in which the two coexist, producing an almost seamless connection. The catsuit performs a problematic relation to the body, negotiating the mediation between human and dress. It encloses the human in such a compact way that the intimacy created between the two generate an erotic impression. It is not, however, a standard item of clothing that causes attraction, because it can “simultaneously cover and reveal”. The mediation mentioned is that between a human and gender appearance, achieved by wearing clothes - with the presumption that these are gendered prior to contact with the body. A catsuit, however, escapes this problematic interaction, as the body inside it appears and disappears into something cyborg-like, though very organic at the core level, thanks to the fabric’s material qualities. As stated by Simon Hoare, the reason why latex fabric is organic (by connotation also

natural and humane) is that it performs a set of reactions similar to those of human skin. It “responds to liquids and light, chemicals from the environment and the skin”\(^{28}\) and is susceptible of marking and bruising despite its apparent flexibility. It also shows different levels of transparency, almost simulating skin that allows different amounts of blood vessels to be visible through it, depending on natural factors like temperature. Latex then behaves in a bodily manner and the experience of wearing it resembles almost an interaction between bodies. Hoare emphasizes the necessity of mutual adaptation while wearing latex - moisturising skin and lubricating the garment are some of the rituals that require physical endeavor in order to create a connection between human skin and latex second skin. The necessity of adaptation appears to create a closer bond that denies the garment’s status as a static object that assists human body in a very inanimate way. Instead, the procedures facilitate the garment’s simulation of a second body that encases the human.

Henri Lefebvre theorizes the mechanism of adaptation as an inferior level of social reality that stems from a manipulated desire of realising one’s body in time and space so as to embody a make-believe. The act of adapting to a commodity and to a desire is categorised as an “emotional projection”\(^{29}\). One’s adaptation once more requires the process of labour fetishisation so as to be completed in the act of possession. The most evident representation of fetish, however, lies in the measures necessary to be taken so that human skin is fully able to interact with a product derived from a source external to human body, yet again manifesting the tensions of the natural and the fabricated.

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CONCLUSION

A garment enters a complex epistemological structure of qualities of sex, gender, femininity and the humane or artificial, as sexual fetishism and the fetish of human labour find their application upon the human body. Revolving around the problem of culturally established patterns of gender normativity, sexual subjectivity might often be stigmatised by the final stage of the production chain - consumption. The black latex catsuit, however, succeeds in renouncing the concept of a body as an interposition for the question of natural and externally determined or produced. The cyborg encapsulated in the latex catsuit represents an ambiguous yet speculative attempt in which gender subjectivity prevails and the body is not confined to its function. The resulting combination stands against the claim of transformation of human into a commodity seen as an elevation.  

The organism that escapes cultural make-believe is, however, incomplete and does not generate solutions. Nevertheless, it posits an argument towards hybridised sexuality that is largely affected by social and economic structures, creating an image of human bodies as cyborgs that function as “maps of power and identity”.

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BIBLIOGRAPHY


